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ABSTRACT

In 1991, Nebraska school superintendents and building administrators were surveyed about the physical condition of school facilities, their adequacy for instruction, and each district's fiscal capacity to maintain and construct school facilities. Responses were analyzed by five categories: class (size) of school district, quartile of valuation per pupil, population change category on the 1990 county census, time period of facility construction, and instructional type of building (grade range). Overall, 40 percent of administrators felt that their facilities impeded desired changes in instructional programming, and 55 percent of buildings were not completely handicapped accessible. However, there were significant differences among districts by size, fiscal capacity, and recent population change. Small school districts reported higher rates of inadequate buildings, low sinking fund rates, little bond debt, and little confidence that bond issues would be successful. K-12 school buildings were reported only in small districts, usually districts experiencing population decline; most buildings were 40-90 years old and contained uncomfortable and obsolete classrooms. All categories of districts had facility needs--some related to overcrowding, others to deterioration. However, the inequity resulting from dependence on property tax for funding of school facilities construction means that poorer districts do not have the potential to construct or upgrade facilities. Statewide recommendations are outlined. (SV)

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NEBRASKA SCHOOL FACILITIES:

EDUCATIONAL ADEQUACY OF STRUCTURES AND THEIR FUNDING

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Nebraska Department of Education

School District Organization Services

A Presentation Document

to

Rural and Small Schools Conference

The Nebraska's Rural School Facilities Crisis

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Abstract

In 1991, Nebraska school superintendents and building administrators were surveyed to determine their opinion regarding physical condition and adequacy for student instruction in their districts. Superintendents were surveyed regarding their district's fiscal capacity to maintain and construct school facilities. The survey responses were analyzed by categorized into five indexes: "Class" of Nebraska school district, "Quartile of Valuation/Pupil," "Population Change Category" of 1990 county census, time "Periods of Facility Construction," and instructional type of "Building Category." The Pearson's chi square test of independence was used to test for significance of the differences, and a contingency coefficient was calculated to determine the effect of the differences.

Significant differences were found in the Nebraska administrators opinions of the condition and adequacy of their school facilities when the facilities were compared by the different categories. Building administrators reported 18 percent of their buildings overcrowded; 18 percent were "poor" facilities for existing instructional programs; 40 percent prevented or inhibited desired changes in instructional programming; 10 percent of the buildings were not generally free from safety hazards; and 55 percent of the buildings were not completely handicapped accessible.

Significant differences also existed in the responses of superintendents concerning their district's fiscal capacity for maintenance and construction of facilities. Superintendents in districts where patrons had access to more property valuation/pupil had lower special building or sinking fund levies, less facility bond debt, and a higher rate of confidence in future fiscal self-reliance for facility needs in their districts. Superintendent responses in counties of increasing population indicated a high need and urgency for facility bond issue referendums, while superintendents in counties experiencing decline had many older buildings in need of replacement and were not as confident of referendum success.

Background and Purpose of the Study

The call for school improvement and transformation of our educational programs has caused leaders in the nation's school systems to closely examine their infrastructure. In many cases school superintendents are faced with placing students and teachers in buildings that are inadequate due to age, lacking in open access, flawed in their mechanical or structural systems and, in growth areas, overcrowded. To accentuate the problem, these same schools lack the fiscal resources to maintain or replace inadequate facilities.

While National and State goals point toward improving education with a new focus based on world class standards, little has been mentioned regarding how to bring the schoolhouse into the picture. Construction needs are created by the necessity to replace aging and inadequate facilities and build new facilities to adjust for population changes. Patrons in Nebraska school districts rely on property tax revenues for financing major facility maintenance projects and bond issues for facility construction projects. This continued reliance on property taxes for facility construction, added to the growing disparity of wealth among school districts, creates a great potential for financial problems.

During the 1991-92 school year, there were 777 public school districts in the State of Nebraska. There are little reliable data available regarding the condition of Nebraska school facilities. Nebraska decision makers are forced to base their judgments regarding school facilities on incomplete information or to rely upon their sense of the circumstances of local school district infrastructure.

The purpose for conducting this study was to establish an initial Nebraska public school facilities inventory. The results of this inventory are used to describe the condition of Nebraska school facilities during the 1991-92 school year. Second, an analysis of the inventory was used to determine if significant relationships exist between comparative district wealth, current bond indebtedness, building age, and population growth, when compared to school management's perception of fiscal capacity for future funding of facilities.

Methodology

The population included in this study was the universe of 1991-92 Nebraska Class II, III, IV, V, and Class VI school superintendents and building principals. During the 1991-92 school year there were 299 school districts in the five classifications being studied. Class I school districts were excluded from the study because of their inconsistent employment of an on-site administrator. The research design for this study was survey research. Nebraska school facilities are located throughout the state. A primary goal of the project was to collect a representative picture of the condition of school facilities throughout the state. A survey was developed and used to collect both facility demographics and administrator's opinions of their district's attendance center facilities. Two survey questionnaires were created to collect information from both central school district and attendance center administrators. Questions on the instruments requested school facility demographic information and school management opinions regarding their respective facilities. The collection of this universe of Nebraska school facility information was made through assistance to the researcher by the staff of the Nebraska Council of School Administrators (NCSA) and Senior Fellows of the University of Nebraska Department of Educational Administration. Financial information used the most currently available information, 1990-91, from the Nebraska Department of Education. The study contains a descriptive accounting, by class, of school districts of permanent and portable attendance centers, district wealth for support of facilities, and current bond debt. Also included in this data is central school administration's opinion regarding the need for a capital improvement bond issue, anticipation of its success, opinion of educational adequacy, deferred maintenance, handicapped accessibility, and fiscal capability. A second set of data includes, by district, building demographics. These demographics encompass attendance center enrollment range, age range, teaching stations, enrollment, capacity, and the perceptions of school administrators regarding their facilities interior and exterior condition and adequacy for current and future educational programs.

Findings and Conclusions

Class IV and V urban school districts, Lincoln and Omaha, and other districts experiencing growth were reported with:

- ***A great need and urgency for bond referendums and their success***

Comment for Discussion: The dramatic population and economic shift in the state of Nebraska is creating a high need for new facilities in districts experiencing population decline as well as those experiencing growth.

Small Class II and Class III school districts were reported with:

- ***higher rates of inadequate buildings, which inhibit change, and exteriors which are in poor condition.***
- ***low sinking fund levy rates, little bond debt***
- ***low confidence of success of bond issues***

Comment for Discussion: Many small Nebraska school districts are facing continued population decline with a high degree of uncertainty regarding their school's future which is reflected in a mood of quandary regarding future school facility construction.

Property-poor districts with low valuation per pupil were reported by administrators with:

- ***a higher rate of buildings not accommodating technology***
- ***facility maintenance more frequently delayed***
- ***facilities limiting instructional change***
- ***more portable or temporary facilities***
- ***anticipation for bond issues and confidence in their success***

Property-wealthy districts with a high property valuation per pupil were reported by their management with:

- ***more buildings whose interiors and exteriors were in poor condition***
- ***fewer air conditioned buildings***
- ***buildings less accessible to the handicapped***
- ***buildings accommodating educational change and the use of technology***
- ***a lower rate of use of sinking fund levies and less bond debt***
- ***less anticipation for bond issues and less confidence of the success when needed***

Comment for Discussion: If good school buildings provide a place to provide our youth with a good education, then the inequity of the property tax as a basis for funding school facilities is again very obvious. The wealthy have the resources while the poor make do with what they have.

School management of buildings and districts located in counties which experienced population growth reported:

- ***higher rates of overcrowded buildings***
- ***more buildings reported as not completely accessible to handicapped individuals***
- ***more air conditioned buildings with more comfortable classrooms***
- ***buildings accommodating new instructional technologies***
- ***utilization of portable facilities at a higher rate***
- ***facilities which were more limiting to the instructional program***

- *a higher rate of use and levy rate of sinking funds than in population decline areas*
- *a higher rate of utilization of bond obligation and debt rate that in population decline areas*
- *a high rate of need for facility construction bond issues with confidence of success*

Principals and superintendents in school districts in counties reported to be in population decline paint a gloomy picture. These school managers reported:

- *high rates of buildings whose interiors and exteriors are in poor condition*
- *facilities inhibiting changes in the educational programs*
- *high rates of buildings considered not free of safety hazards*
- *delayed maintenance and remodeling because of required attention to asbestos removal and handicapped accessibility projects*
- *lower use of building fund levies and with little bond debt*
- *an urgency for facility construction bond issues with a low anticipation of success of the bond issue*

Comment for Discussion: The shift in Nebraska's population has become one of the major factors facing Nebraska school officials. Either way, population growth or decline, these school officials will be required to make many difficult decisions regarding the places where the will provide, and how they will provide, education for their children.

When periods of original construction were considered, the building administrators reported older were reported at the lowest or poorest extreme in almost every item explored on the questionnaire. Facilities categorized in the grouping considered to represent old facilities were reported:

- *to be the most inhibiting to instructional change*
- *to have the highest rate of poor interiors and exteriors*
- *with many uncomfortable classrooms*
- *with the highest rate of buildings judged not generally free from safety hazards*
- *the least accessible to handicapped individuals*
- *the least accommodating to the utilization of new technologies*

Superintendents in districts where the majority of their buildings were categorized into the groups considered to have older facilities, reported

- *frequently delaying facility maintenance*
- *giving more attention to required work such as handicapped accessibility and asbestos removal*
- *efforts to restructure their district's instructional programs being limited*
- *their district less fiscally capable to meet facility needs without raising taxes*
- *their districts anticipated a bond issue with a high rate of urgency, but at the same time did not anticipate the success of their district's facility bond referendum*
- *patrons paying less bond debt*

Comment for Discussion: Nearly 40% of all of Nebraska's Class II through VI school buildings were originally constructed more than 50 years ago. Many of these facilities will soon require major renovation or replacement. Funding resources for these construction projects will need to be equitably provided.

The results of the facility type analysis did not reveal any significant results when comparing elementary to secondary, middle to secondary, or middle to elementary. However, analysis of the K-12 instructional facility type did reveal the following

characteristics:

- *this building type was reported only in Class II and small Class III districts*
- *districts with K-12 buildings tended to have a higher valuation per pupil*
- *districts with K-12 buildings were in counties where population was in decline*
- *most K-12 buildings were constructed prior to 1950*
- *most K-12 structures are at least 40 years old and some as old as 90 years*
- *K-12 facilities have the highest rate of uncomfortable classrooms*
- *most K-12 facility classrooms are not air conditioned*
- *most K-12 facility classrooms do not accommodate the use of new technology*
- *most K-12 buildings are not accessible to the handicapped*

Comment for Discussion: Nebraska's K-12 school buildings are the symbol of our past. The community school is, in most cases, the pride of the small community. Today many of these school facilities are under-utilized and in poor repair, some literally falling down. In the very near future, many of these communities with these K-12 facilities will be required to make difficult decisions regarding their school and its' facilities.

Recommendations

Resources should be provided for and efforts made to further study the methodology for inspection and collection of school facility information.

There should exist in Nebraska a state-wide program and responsible personnel to periodically inspect, collect and report information regarding structural conditions and demographics of school facilities.

A state-wide information base regarding the status of Nebraska school facilities should be established.

A study of Nebraska school districts should be conducted to specifically identify the required adjustments in facilities, remodeling, and retrofitting of climate control systems necessary to accommodate a year-round instructional program within the State. This information could be used to determine related costs and feasibility for a year-round instructional program.

The Nebraska School Finance Committee and Nebraska Legislative policy-makers should review the reliance of the patrons of a school district upon the local property tax base for construction of public school facilities in light of the current efforts to make the financing of education in Nebraska more fiscally equitable.

Implications for Further Study

In addition to the recommendations previously made, the following suggestions are made for further investigation regarding the status of Nebraska's school facilities.

A study should be conducted to determine the methodologies and resources utilized in other states for school facility inspection, data collection, and data analysis and analysis reporting.

A detailed study should be conducted regarding the history of school finance litigation in relation to the financing of school facilities, the current methodology for the financing of school facilities, equitable alternatives for financing school facilities, and how these alternatives might be incorporated into Nebraska's current school finance methodology.

A study should be conducted to determine if the physical and instructional condition of Nebraska school facilities has an effect upon the morale of the instructional team and the quality of instruction provided to the pupils in the school.

A study should be conducted to determine the effects of changes in Nebraska population upon the attitudes of patrons of school districts regarding their school systems instructional program, their attitude toward their current facilities, and the potential for new facilities or new facilities in a consolidated or reorganized school district.

Summary

The survey of Nebraska school administrators confirmed that many of the State's school facilities in the early 1990's had grown obsolete for their intended purposes, and inadequate to meet the physical and instructional needs of many of the district's pupils. The resources necessary to maintain, remodel, or construct new facilities were not potentially available to many districts because of the inequity of access to these fiscal resources.

It is incumbent upon policy-makers and legislative leaders to initiate a plan for correction of these deficiencies and fiscal inequities. Many of the facility deficiencies may have been the result of the fiscal inequities which exist from district to district. To prescribe change, leaders will be required to begin to search for answers regarding Nebraska's facility predicament. Planners will need additional information to provide decision makers with an accurate picture of the different facility problems which exist across the state. Action should be taken now to further the investigation of the status of Nebraska's school facilities. Negligence to act upon the identified facility problems will only allow this general decline of the adequacy of educational facilities to grow worse and the fiscal disparities to increase.